

Kol Nidre

Carrying the Chair

There was a moment this summer when I thought that my neighborhood was on fire. On my drive home from the temple, the sunlight was oddly visible, streaming down from a yellowish sky. An acrid smell of burning wood and plastic was building in the air.

My house was just fine, but the smoke was thickening. I joined my neighbors in the street as we tried to locate its source. Then it hit us: this was the smoke from the wildfires out west.

For the first time, I felt it in my *kishkes*. The sheer magnitude of the situation came crashing down on me. We weren't sheltered from the reality of this disaster, even across 3,000 miles. My personal limitations suddenly came into very sharp focus; I began to despair for the future. What could any of us do in the face of such overwhelming destruction?

As I wrestled with this question, a dear friend reminded me of a teaching from the Hasidic master Rebbe Nachman of Bratzlav. His wisdom offers us a way to see ourselves, and our reaction to difficult situations, in a whole new light.

Rebbe Nachman wrestled with depression throughout this life. In one of his most powerful reflections, he said, "The main thing is to strengthen oneself in every way possible, for there is no such thing as despair in the world!"¹

Rebbe Nachman believed that despair isn't found in Creation itself. It is a human construct, found in the heart, that can easily overpower us. Our task is to recognize despair when we first feel it, and respond with compassion for ourselves. This is one way for us to "strengthen ourselves", as the Rebbe teaches. As we resist it, we can respond, newly refreshed, by bringing healing to our spirits and to our world.

Rebbe Nachman was speaking from a personal perspective. Each of us has to navigate the narrow bridge of our lives, avoiding a fall into the pit of despair. There are many ways to interpret his instruction to "strengthen ourselves in every way possible." The Rebbe's Hasidim, his followers, took this idea and applied it to their community as a

¹ Likutei Mohanan 2:78:7:3

whole. They knew that we can combat despair most effectively when we face our challenges together.

There's a wonderful story that's told, not of Rebbe Nachman himself, but of his disciples. And about the Rebbe's chair. In the early 1800s, Rebbe Nachman was gifted with a beautiful and ornately carved wooden chair. It inspired him – he spoke about it in several of his stories and reflections. After the Rebbe died, this special chair remained beloved to his students and to his family.

In the first part of the 20th century, the situation changed for the worse. Pogroms swept Eastern Europe and people began to flee. So the question arose: what to do with the Rebbe's chair? It was a truly magnificent piece of furniture. Which meant, among other things, that it was large, recognizable and very heavy. They didn't want to abandon it. How could it be preserved? How could it be saved along with the people who were trying to make their way to refuge in Israel?

The community assembled and debated the issue. We can only imagine the heartache, the fear, the despair that they must have felt. Yet, amazingly, they found inspiration and courage and strength together to make a plan. The chair would be disassembled – no small feat in itself! – and distributed amongst them. Each part would be entrusted to a different person who would carry it with them on the difficult journey to Israel. After prayers and tears, they dispersed, each family travelling with their own piece of the chair on their way to Jerusalem.

There are different versions of this first part of the story. Yet it's a matter of history that all of the pieces of the chair arrived in Jerusalem by 1936. Ultimately, it was completely restored by the Israel Museum. It's been on display in the Breslov synagogue in Jerusalem to this day.

That's how one community successfully wrestled with despair and triumphed over it. It required many individuals to come together with a common purpose; to work to accomplish something that no single person could do alone. We can see ourselves having a similar task to accomplish on this Yom Ha-Kippurim – on this new Day of Atonement.

The Rabbis teach that Yom Kippur is a time for us to do *t'shuvah* – to address transgressions between God and ourselves.² As important as this work might be,

² Mishnah – Yoma 8:9

atonement for our personal shortcomings can feel overwhelming when considered in light of the many other burdens we're carrying. Whether we are struggling with climate change, racism or any of the critical issues of our day, a sense of despair might keep any of us from acting due to sheer fatigue.

Rebbe Nachman counsels us that, before anything else, we must not be dominated by despair. Instead, when we recognize this feeling arising within ourselves, we can take it as a reminder to pause. This is an invitation to engage in *cheshbon ha-nefesh* – to take stock and to name the situation that is causing us pain. This is another way, as the Rebbe said, to “strengthen ourselves in every way possible”. We, in our community, know how to find that strength.

At Rosh Ha-Shanah, we affirmed the nourishing power of our relationships at Beth El. We can feel it in the uplift and deep meaning we find in our prayers, our study and our social action projects. And throughout this holy day, we can feel it as we engage in a shared process. We're reaffirming our collective responsibility to one another and for one another. This allows *t'shuvah*, turning from destructive behavior, turning towards our best vision of ourselves, to flourish. It allows hope to blossom from despair.

As we move through this process, we can both acknowledge our personal shortcomings and also reflect on our need to act in the broader world. We can recognize where we have fallen short in our charge to care for Creation and for those who live in it. And then we can commit ourselves, in partnership with our community and with our Creator, to stepping forward – to mending the breach in this profound relationship. We're working together – each of us has our own part of the “chair” to carry. Each one of them is important to our overall task of bringing healing to ourselves and to our world. Together, we can join our efforts to form a beautiful and united whole.

In tomorrow morning's *d'var Torah*, we'll continue to explore how to respond to the big issues of our day, both as individuals and as a community. And thanks to some of our *tikkun olam* sub-committees, I'll share guidance for practical action that we can follow throughout 5782.

For now, let's allow ourselves to be supported by the sustaining energy of this day. Let's open ourselves to the possibility that we can find new courage to face our shortcomings with honesty as we do the holy work of *t'shuvah*. And let's embrace the truth, as Rebbe Nachman taught, that when we encourage one another, our capacity for resilience may surprise even ourselves.

As a people of hope, this is how we will engage in the great work of this day. We will look into our deepest being and look out upon our world. And, if we truly engage in this process, we will find ourselves emerging newly refreshed, with repentant spirits, ready to take action.

On this Day of Atonement, this Day of Turning-Towards:

May our hands be strengthened;

May our hearts be opened;

May we merit to bring healing to ourselves, to our loved ones, and to all who dwell on earth.